

a. What does Rabbi Weisser say causes people to turn pre-existing prejudice into hatred?

He said that when we create a need within ourselves to hate, we try and find a reason to hate other people.

b. What did Larry Trapp do to harass Rabbi Weisser? Why?

Larry Trapp sent Rabbi Weisser pamphlets of anti-black, anti-jew material, sent threatening phone calls, and told him that the Klu Klux Klan were watching him. He probably did this because he was brought up in a society where hatred was created within him.

c. How did Rabbi Weisser respond to Mr. Trapp? Did it surprise you? Why or why not?

Rabbi Weisser responded with love for Mr Trapp, and asked him whether he wanted to talk or needed help. I was somewhat surprised, because I think I would have been too scared to show love in that situation.

d. Why do you think Mr. Trapp decided to change his life, and to call on Rabbi Weisser for help? What do you make of the fact that Mr. Trapp changed so much before the end of his life?

Because, when Mr Trapp asked the Rabbi for help, Rabbi Weisser forgave him, he began to weaken the hatred that had been instilled in him. Because the Rabbi forgave him, Mr Trapp became a much better and much happier person by the end of his life.

e. Allan Goldberg describes Rabbi Weisser as a “mensch,” or "honorable person." How does this word apply to Rabbi Weisser? Do you know any people whom you would consider mensches?

It means that even when he was shown hatred by Mr Trapp, he forgave him, and thus changed Mr Trapp's life around. If only we could all be like that. I think our pastor is always willing to forgive people, and I would consider him an honorable person.

f. Why do you think Rabbi Weisser was drawn to Queens to work to revitalize the Free Synagogue?

So that he could bring more love and kindness to the neighborhood, break ancient prejudices, and work to strengthen the church.

## **Lessons on Love, From a Rabbi Who Knows Hate and Forgiveness**

**By MANNY  
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The new rabbi of the Free Synagogue of Flushing began his Friday night sermon with a topic he knew well: hatred's power, and its antidote.

The rabbi, Michael Weisser, had spoken earlier that day at a Queens mosque. He was warmly greeted

by the imam who invited him there. But as he left the mosque, still wearing his tan kipa, the Jewish skullcap that resembles the one Muslims wear, a man driving by who had apparently mistaken him for a Muslim shouted that he should go back where he came from, Rabbi Weisser told the congregation.

“Hatred comes forth from some pre-existing prejudice,” he said, “and only when we create the need within ourselves to hate, do we then develop reasons to justify our hatred.”

Rabbi Weisser is the uncommon leader of an uncommon place, a soft-spoken man from Nebraska who has tangled with the Ku Klux Klan and is now trying to revitalize a small synagogue in the bustling heart of Queens.

The Free Synagogue, the oldest Reform Judaism synagogue in the borough, is a symbol of Flushing’s nearly forgotten past, when the area around Main Street was lined not with Chinese, Vietnamese and Korean restaurants and supermarkets, but with Jewish grocers, tailors and butcher shops.

Signs of that old neighborhood have all but disappeared. In the 1980s, Flushing’s Jewish population began steadily falling, making way for waves of immigrants who transformed the neighborhood into one of the most ethnically diverse in the country. Its last kosher delicatessen, Flushing Delight, on Union Street, shut its doors in 1995.

The Free Synagogue, which decades ago had several hundred members, now has only about 100. Its religious school closed a few years ago.

Yet the synagogue has held on, surviving for 91 years with a loyal core of longtime supporters. Many are elderly men and women, who come from around Queens to sing and pray beneath the stained-glass windows of the domed sanctuary.

Rabbi Weisser, 67, held his first service there in early September. It was a homecoming of sorts: In the 1970s, he studied at Hebrew Union College in Manhattan, where he received his certification as a cantor. He was ordained a rabbi years later, in 2001.

He is a study in contrasts, with a penchant both for meditation and for hitting the gym five times a week. As a young man, he spent a few years in prison for burglaries in New York and New Jersey. “I had a really troubled youth,” he said. “It helped me understand some of the troubles others are going through.”

That empathy taught him a powerful lesson about hatred — and brought him national attention.

In 1991, he was living in Lincoln, Neb., with his wife at the time, Julie Michael, and three of their five children. He was then the cantor and spiritual leader of the South Street Temple, the oldest Jewish congregation in Lincoln. One Sunday morning, a few days after they had moved into their new house, the phone rang.

The man on the other end of the line called Rabbi Weisser “Jew boy” and told him he would be sorry he had moved in. Two days later, a thick package of anti-black, anti-Semitic pamphlets arrived in the mail, including an unsigned card that read, “The KKK is watching you, scum.”

The messages, it turned out, were from Larry Trapp, the Grand Dragon of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan in Nebraska, who kept loaded weapons, pro-Hitler material and his Klan robe in his cramped Lincoln apartment. Then 42, Mr. Trapp was nearly blind and used a wheelchair to get around; both of his legs had been amputated because of diabetes.

In a 1992 interview with Time magazine, Mr. Trapp said he had wanted to scare Rabbi Weisser into moving out of Lincoln. “As the state leader, the Grand Dragon, I did more than my share of work because I wanted to build up the state of Nebraska into a state as hateful as North Carolina and Florida,” he said. “I spent a lot of money and went out of my way to instill fear.”

Rabbi Weisser, who suspected the person threatening him was Mr. Trapp, got his telephone number and started leaving messages on the answering machine. “I would say things like: ‘Larry, there’s a lot of love out there. You’re not getting any of it. Don’t you want some?’ And hang up,” he said. “And, ‘Larry, why do you love the Nazis so much? They’d have killed you first because you’re disabled.’ And hang up. I did it once a week.”

One day, Mr. Trapp answered. Ms. Michael, the rabbi’s wife, had told him to say something nice if he ever got Mr. Trapp on the line, and he followed her advice. “I said: ‘I heard you’re disabled. I thought you might need a ride to the grocery,’ ” Rabbi Weisser said.

Then, one night, Rabbi Weisser’s phone rang again. It was Mr. Trapp. “He said, quote-unquote — I’ll never forget it, it was like a chilling moment, in a good way — he said, ‘I want to get out of what I’m doing and I don’t know how,’ ” Rabbi Weisser said.

He and Ms. Michael drove to Mr. Trapp’s apartment that night. The three talked for hours, and a close friendship formed. The couple’s home became a kind of hospice for Mr. Trapp, who moved into one of their bedrooms as his health worsened, and Ms. Michael became Mr. Trapp’s caretaker and confidante.

Mr. Trapp eventually renounced the Klan, apologized to many of those he had threatened and converted to Judaism in Rabbi Weisser’s synagogue.

The relationship later inspired a 1995 book by Kathryn Watterson, “Not by the Sword: How the Love of a Cantor and His Family Transformed a Klansman.”

It has become popular reading among members of the Free Synagogue, where Rabbi Weisser’s arrival has created new optimism and some new traditions. The rabbi started a meditation class on Tuesdays, and plans other new programs in hopes of attracting younger families to the synagogue.

“In Yiddish, there’s a word — mensch,” said Allan Goldberg, a longtime member and former president of the synagogue, describing a term for an honorable person. “He’s a mensch.”

Last Friday night, the topics of hatred and understanding took on a larger meaning, as the rabbi discussed the escalating violence between Israelis and Palestinians. He told the congregation that God had taken clay from the four corners of the earth and breathed life into it to create humanity. “Our religion teaches that we’re all made of the same stuff,” he said.

Mr. Trapp, the former Klan leader, died in Rabbi Weisser’s Lincoln home in September 1992, less than a year after they met. The rabbi spoke at his funeral.

“People were taken by the idea that an act of kindness can make a change,” Rabbi Weisser said. “ ‘Need a ride to the grocery?’ ,” you know?”